

Reactionary Islamism - Mathias Wåg



The Arab Spring's wave of protests were followed by counterrevolution. The old regimes returned and directed their repression both towards the left and moderate political islamism. Other regimes were turned to rubble and left weakened. In that void jihadism has found room to grow and become a political power once again. Can an anti-fascist analysis help us understand what has happened?

1.

After spring comes fall. The Arab Spring shook power-structures and authoritarian regimes in north Africa and the middle east. But then came the reaction. Either the social protests were cut off by islamic political movements or the old regimes returned, just as repressive as before. The demands for democracy and social justice were silenced for the time being. In this number of Brand we will be following the reactionary mobilization that followed the Arab Spring. What happens when the revolts end in failure?

2.

How are we to analyze counterrevolutionary movements? One way off understanding them is to employ the same theories we used in an attempt to understand counterrevolutions in Europe during the 20th century. That is to say, using the historical analyzes of fascism. Can reactionary islamism and the counterrevolution be understood as a fascist mobilization? We believe it can. We believe that the analysis of fascism can help us understand how these movements are built and act, behind their ideological and religious gloss. It is not about smearing the label fascism on islamist movements to gather easy rhetorical points and to create a far-fetched chain of guilt-by-association, like the extreme right-wing islam hating groups in Europe that speak of "Islamofascism". Nor is it about viewing the middle east as "the others", that need a very special set of analytical tools in order to understand reactionary tendencies. We are convinced that a materialist analysis can be used fruitfully without slipping down in to eurocentrism or orientalism, without neither denying the special history of the middle east nor the common global characteristics of the last years protests.

3.

When the socialist and communist movements of the 1920s tried to understand the rise of fascism in Europe, they described counterrevolution as a reaction to the attempts of revolution and the global economical crisis, as an authoritarian policy of crisis from above — that also has a character of mass, that it mobilized a mass movement from below. Fascism was in that sense a double threat to the left. It was both a physical threat on the streets aimed at eliminating the structures of the workers' movement and a social threat by organizing a reactionary block in civil society. Fascism distinguished itself in that sense from other right-wing conservative streams by having characteristics of a popular



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movement and a social threat by organizing a reactionary block in civil society. Fascism distinguished itself in that sense from other right-wing conservative streams by having characteristics of a popular

movement. Fascism rose when the revolutionary movement had failed, when a hegemonic capitalist-class is in decline and the revolutionary forces were too weak to take its place.

4.

The biggest fascist organizations in Europe were politicized militias, founded by veterans returning home after the first world war. They brought the military form of organization in to politics and created fighting bands (in Italian: “fasci di combattimento”). Modern day researchers on fascism, such as Michael Mann, emphasize this paramilitary foundation as one of the defining characteristics of fascism. Indeed, no matter the color, all political parties had safety forces, but only fascism developed through them and used them militarily. The paramilitarism gave fascism extralegal means of crushing the workers'

movements where the legal state had failed. The paramilitary movement acted as a total institution, a closed ideological community in which you lived around the clock with violent confrontation as a unifying force. Step by step the politicized militias came to play a role of state within the state, a parallel double authority that challenged the monopoly on violence of a weak state and could guarantee the restoration of order for employers in industry and farming better than the state itself could. A substantial part of the cadres of fascism were not only veterans of war but also various state officers who had worryingly watched the weakening of the state. The fascist forces did not only stand for the violence that preserved order but could also act as yellow unions, make deals with the employer and offer social safety nets and cultural activities for its members. This allowed fascism to act on several planes; it proposed a solution to the economical crisis by enforcing crisis policies and smashing the workers' movement, it gave a solution to the military crisis and offered continued struggle and revanchism for the homecoming soldiers that felt betrayed after their losses. Fascism could offer a political response to a weak state through the construction of a double authoritative force, its own order creating violence where the state couldn't and finally answer the ideological crisis through its authoritarian vision of consensus in an organic, unitary society beyond societal conflict and class struggle.

5.

Newer research on fascism tends to emphasize that the ideological core of fascism is made up of an aggressive nationalism. Roger Griffin defines fascism ideologically as a utopian populist myth about national rebirth. The nation is viewed as run down and needs to be reinstated through a revolutionary rebirth and reconnecting with its roots. Stanley G Payne suggests that fascism is the most revolutionary form of nationalism. Robert Paxton points out that the view of the nation as run down or decadent within fascism means that the reestablishment requires a violent inner cleansing, a cleansing of the elements that are viewed as responsible for the decay and for it to be combined with an outer expansion of the nation in a revanchist manner. Michael Mann suggests that the paramilitary tendencies of fascism view the movement as a crusade, a holy war to return absolute values and cleanse the nation. Nationalism becomes what is supposed to conquer inner divergence and overcome social conflicts. However this need does not necessarily have to be satisfied by the nation or state. Payne describes the nationalism of fascism as a secular religion, where the myth of the nation fulfills the same function as religion. But while Payne

emphasizes the secular characteristic of fascism, that there are no religious dogmas restricting the free violence of authorities in fascism, other researches of fascism such as Paxton have made the point that several fascist movements have been religious. The Spanish Falangists, the Finnish Lapua movement or the Romanian Iron Guard all stood on a religious foundation. Religion could fulfill the same function as nationalism within fascism, as the organic and transcendental ideology that would be reinstated to resolve the decadency and decline of the present through violent inner cleansing. Religion could act as an equally powerful motor and identity forming myth as the nation. Some cultures have seen the religious identity as far more important than that of the nations.

6.

Fascism as a counterrevolution and as a view of the return to a national (or religious) origin does not suggest that fascism is to be viewed as an antimodern movement. The critique of modernity is instead to be seen as an establishing of another modernity. The historical myth is used to reshape modernity in to something else. It is faulty to assume the idea that fascist or reactionary movements want to turn back the clock and return to a lost epoch. It is about putting the conservative nostalgia in service of modern change. Fascism was politically innovative in using the latest modern communications, such as radio and film to reach out to the masses and to combine them with ritualized and staged mass campaigns. The defense of traditional values did not retard the capitalist development, instead fascists were quick to apply the new fordist mass production. Despite its antimodernist rhetoric, fascism operated within modernity, it was a modern reaction to modernity.

7.

These observations on European fascism as a movement prove useful when we look closer at the reactionary islamist movements that have been given space after the dissolution of the Arab Spring's social justice protests. The democratic movements were pushed back and the Arab Spring turned from hope to nightmare and bitter resentment. Instead the regions sectarian, territorial and ethnic conflicts have escalated, supported by different geopolitical interests. A political void has arisen that reactionary Islamic organizations have been able to fill: the Arabic left was too tightly knit with the national secular autocratic dictatorships and the social movements too weak. The moderate islamism failed, either through it being crushed like in Egypt or because they were too utopian.

The state powers were weakened and in the case of the falls of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, they were viewed as linked to an occupying force. The Sunni Arabic world especially today is in an existential crisis.

Having no other options, the field is left wide open for counterrevolutionary movements.

The ones able to fill this void were the politicized militias. The Sunni and Shia resistances of the American occupation of Iraq took this form. The Shia Arabs today make out about 60% of the Iraqi population and had, under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, a long tradition of creating social political movements to defend their communities and defend their faith. These movements were the foundation of the militias that offered resistance to the American occupation, often with the financial support of Iran. The American dissolution of the Iraqi army freed large groups of officers and soldiers that brought their knowledge and expertise to the Sunni militias. When the USA left Iraq in 2009, the Shia militias made tighter and tighter bonds with the new regime and were integrated in the Iraqi army. Instead the repression and attacks were direction at the Sunni community. A Sunni Muslim wave of demonstrations and protests, following the regimes harsher stance after Americas departure, was bloodily suppressed. The answer became an increased growth of Sunni militias for protection.

When the social protests in Syria turned in to civil war the Assad regime chose to concentrate its military protection and control on the more populated regions. They withdrew and left large portions of the country to the Sunni militias that soon marginalized all the secular and democratic portions of the resistance. It is against this background that the Sunni militia ISIS (later Islamic State) and Al-Nusra Front grows in Iraq and Syria. The discrimination of Sunni Muslims laid the foundation that the Islamic State would be built upon. With the dissolution of the Iraqi army the Islamic State got many former army officers that had previously been members of Saddam Husseins Ba'ath party before the American occupation and had participated in the resistance towards it.

8.

Both the Sunni and Shia militias act as a state within the state, an alternative form of state during a period of state collapse. Ches Turber describe them as sociopolitical militias, to emphasize their political importance in society. The

militias get wide popular support by filling the function that the state had previously served. They can offer armed protection and a basic level of social safety,

healthcare and education. The violence of the militias act as an important tool in assuming a position of power, offering protection and to gain legitimacy. Through this position of force they can then attempt to reach political power and redirect state resources to its supportive foundation. This model of double power has since long been practiced by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine.

This grassroots work creates a hegemonic support from below in the territories where they operate and make them impossible to defeat through only military means. Americas bombs have a hard time hitting the mobile forces of the Islamic State without afflicting the entire Sunni population. Any combating of an insurgency may therefore easily be aimed at either the entire population or by backing competing militias. The only way for the domestic regimes to undermine the power of the militias is to offer better service without the insecurity, violence and dogmatism that the Islamic militias bring.

The Islamic States fast progression in comparison to other Sunni Militias is largely due to their ability to construct a territorial counterforce. The Islamic State is today in control over a fourth of Iraq, that is to say most of the Sunni parts and a third of Syria. Their militias are flexible and mobile and have chosen easy over well protected targets. They have thus avoided attacks against Assad, the Kurds stronghold of Erbil or Baghdad, which is protected by Shia militias. Instead the Islamic State have directed a notable part of it's military capacity to establishing an internal hegemony towards other Sunni groups within their competing territory. The violence and executions have been equally aimed towards Sunni Muslims as toward other religious groups.

9.

In the cities that have been taken the Islamic State has been quick to establish a quasi-governmental structure with it's own ministries, courts and systems of taxation. Initially they have seized control over energy, water and grain provision, which has made the local populace dependent on them for survival. They have also been able to create a regional stability that benefits both the Militias and the local inhabitants. The sociopolitical militia have involved several previous state officers which has made it easier for them to substitute the

functions of the state. Today it is estimated that 8 million people live in Islamic State controlled areas. These pay taxes to the Islamic State, a tax which in addition is lower than what was paid to the Assad regime.

Initially the gulf monarchies donations to the Islamic groups that fought Assad and the three years of open Turkish borders were crucial for the establishment of a Sunni resistance. The sociopolitical militias success is due to their ability to act in a zone of conflict between various interests without threatening the global flow of finance in the region. The biggest source of income for the Islamic State has been to seize oil fields in Syria and Iraq. The raw oil is then smuggled in to and sold in Turkey, Iran or Syria using already available paths established in Saddam Husseins Iraq that were used to get around Americas sanctions. The same lines of support that export the raw oil also import foreign jihadist volunteers. The Islamic State is calculated to stand for 9000 barrels of oil per day to the global economy. Through this the Islamic State has been able to become self-sufficient.

10.

Why has religion and not nationalism became the gathering force of the sociopolitical Islamic militias?

One important explanation is that Arabic nations to a large extend were formed by the colonial division, the Sykes-Picot Agreement that France, Russia and the Great Britain made 1916 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The anti-colonial movements after the second world war accepted this division. Many national liberation movements soon deteriorated in to secularized autocratic clans, supported by a state oriented left. The Arabic left bonded with the national secular dictatorships.

Nationalism became the secular ideology that could overcome the regions religious sects and ethnic groupings.

The sociopolitical Islamic militias have now realized the greatest redrawing of the map of the middle east since Sykes-Picot. Religion has been able to replace nationalism as a territorial ideology with demands of a caliphate - without clear geographical borders – and refers to a previously lived Islamic unity (Ummah) before the decline. The religion has in that sense been able to act as the nation of the fundamentalists.

This reborn Islamic territory, the caliphate, must make ties to a previous order before the decline and be based upon the same organic view of society as fascism is. For society to be reestablished out of its decline a biopolitical control over the populace's bodies and behaviors is needed, where the inner threats to the homogeneous body of society is controlled, eliminated and cleared out.

11.

The re-establishment of a caliphate and the return to a previous interpretation of Islam must not be mistaken as anti-modernism. Instead, the goal is to choose another modernity, to confront the western modernity with an Islamic modernity, a way forward built on another tradition. Even political islamism relies on the masses and are a part of the modern project, not a political relic. Reactionary islamism is a reaction to that which is experienced as the problem of modernity and carries concern over the bourgeois subjects dissolution (the family, norms, tradition). Where the post-modern discourse turns to the winners of the crisis of modernity, fundamentalism turns to the losers of global tendencies – and both streams arose simultaneously. Reactionary islamism is a reaction to the moderate middle-way's islamism that strove to resemble the west and a refusal of the Euro-American hegemony.

It is a mistake to see this divergence between modernity and altermodernity as a battle of civilizations.

Even the political islamist movements act within the same global world, within the same international flows of capital and politically operates globally. Thus it is a matter of a conflict within the same global civilization, not a conflict between the civilizations. In this sense it is easier to see how the terrorist part of reactionary Islam strives for a global jihad. The jihadist terrorism is always a form of communication, a message to be broadcast globally and their audience is global. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* explains the terror acts of the Islamic State better than the Quran does. The reactionary Islamic sociopolitical militias are innovative in reaching out to the global media landscape of today with their original propaganda, dramaturgically modeled punity actions, ritualized and staged mass campaigns.

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